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Tsypkin, Mikhail

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Quantity Versus Quality in Today's Soviet Navy

MIKHAIL TSYPKIN

Introduction

Such aspects of the proclaimed new Soviet military doctrine as 'reasonable sufficiency' and 'defensive strategy' are receiving considerable attention from Western observers. At the same time, relatively less attention is being paid to another facet of this doctrine: the transition from quantity to quality in providing for the defense needs of the Soviet Union, announced by Mikhail Gorbachev at the 19th Communist Party Conference in June 1988. From now on, the Soviet leader stated, the security of the USSR would rely not on quantitative factors, but on high quality of military manpower, military hardware and military science.[1]

This change has a special significance for the Soviet Navy (*Voennomorskoy flot* – VMF), which is in the process of ridding itself of old 'low-tech' ships and of adopting some of the most advanced pieces of naval technology built anywhere. The accidents that have recently plagued the VMF, from the explosion of the ammunition depot at Severomorsk to the Mike Class submarine disaster in April 1989, have clearly demonstrated the importance of flawless human performance in operating costly modern naval technology. This article focuses on the problems the Soviets have in providing good manpower, both enlisted and commissioned, and reliable technology, for today's and tomorrow's 'hi-tech' VMF.

Several issues are explored. The professional self-esteem of commissioned officers is important for a successful transition to a 'hi-tech' VMF. The social status of officers, their perception that their service is appreciated and adequately rewarded by the society, their belief that they are treated fairly by their superiors, and that their promotions are based on merit – these are essential for achieving professional pride. Of equal importance are education and training,

an ability to work with modern technology, and officers' confidence in this technology. The quality of conscripts in the ranks of the VMF, their attitude to naval duty and the conditions of their service and training determine their technological proficiency.

Commissioned Officers

The VMF has always stood out among the other services of the Soviet Armed Forces (*Vooruzhennye Sily* – VS) by virtue of its extensive use of relatively advanced technologies, requiring more sophisticated and cultured officers and men than the Ground Forces, its somewhat exotic (for a landlocked country) seafaring character, and even its black uniforms, elegant and unusual compared to the drab khakis of the rest of the VS.[2] In the 1980s the VMF has added one more crucial difference: unlike the Ground Forces and elements of the Air Force (*Voenno-vozdushnye sily* – VVS), the VMF has been unscathed by the war in Afghanistan, with its massive show of brutality towards the Afghan civilians and the Soviet enlisted men, its incompetence only diluted by sporadic strong performance by the special forces, and the final disgrace of a defeat at the hands of a technologically vastly inferior opponent.

A combination of changing social values and harsh economic realities, however, has been reducing the prestige of a career as a naval officer. The government is no longer able to adequately reward naval officers for their difficult jobs. During Leonid Brezhnev's reign (1964–82), the salaries of military officers grew very little, reflecting the general tendency of Brezhnev's regime to increase the incomes of unskilled and semi-skilled labor at the expense of skilled professionals. Even more important than salary are the perks provided by one's employer. Naval officers and their families, frequently living on isolated VMF bases, are totally dependent on the VMF for such essentials as housing, medical care, child care, schools, etc., and they have not been spared by the current consumer crisis.

Housing has been a particularly painful issue. The size of the VMF is estimated to be 437,000 men, of whom 77,000 are commissioned and non-commissioned officers.[3] (The enlisted men, who in the vast majority of cases do not yet have families or are not allowed to take their families to their place of service, have no housing problems.) As of 1 January 1989, the VMF officially listed 19,220, or approximately 25 per cent, of Navy families as having no government-assigned residence (*beskvartirnye*), another 19,362 families, or about 25 per cent, as having inadequate housing (which means extremely

overcrowded conditions without basic conveniences), and 866 families, or about 1 per cent, as living in condemed buildings.[4] The reality is probably even worse than these percentages, because a minority of officers do not have families and live in dormitories. Many officers with families have to rent rooms at exorbitant black market rates, and feel humiliated by the experience.[5]

Glasnost has spread the word of abuses resulting from shortage of housing for VMF officers. Consider a case recently publicized by the government daily *Izvestiya*: a young wife and a baby of a Navy officer at the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol were thrown out of their rented room in the middle of the night. With her husband at sea, she tried in vain to find help from the Communist Party committee of the city. When she refused to leave the party offices, a scuffle developed, after which she was arrested and beaten at a police station, her child was taken away and put for a day in a hospital, and she was fined for 'hooliganism'![6] Incidents like this hardly contribute to the allure of a naval officer's career.

The Soviets recognize the special difficulties faced by naval personnel. Even as living conditions have improved substantially on new Soviet ships, the hardship of service, according to VMF C-in-C Fleet Admiral V.N. Chernavin, has remained:

> Combat work goes on constantly day in day out, week in week out. Watch – short rest – again watch. Living space is limited. The monotony and uniformity are tiring. Hearts long for home, relatives and loved ones. Yet very high vigilance and complete mobilization of forces – spiritual and physical – are required of a seaman.[7]

The combination of sea duty hardships with dire shortages of housing and other amenities, as well as with a promotion system riddled with favoritism, have created among the Soviet naval officers a true syndrome of 'being there' – that is, ashore. A journalist interviewing Fleet Admiral Chernavin, asked:

> 'Shipboard' officers talked to me sadly about the fact that service is easier for the 'landlubbers' and – this is what is shameful – life in general is better. They were talking about distribution of housing, travel vouchers, places in creches and kindergartens, and service promotions. Are the complaints justified?

Chernavin agreed:

> They are to a large extent justified. An alarming trend emerged at one point: reports began to come from young officers

> requesting a transfer from ship to shore . . . Now the situation is gradually being rectified.[8]

As the experience of Soviet escort ships in the Persian Gulf has shown, excellence in sea duty by no means guarantees career advancement for skippers and their officers. Frequently the opposite is true: upon return to port from the Persian Gulf, a ship is subjected to a hostile inspection resulting in revocation of proposed awards for the skipper and his men.[9] Apparently the 'landlubbers', who make careers by 'being there', see officers who have performed well under conditions close to combat as a threat and successfully intrigue against them. Such attitudes impede the promotion of officers with combat experience – a loss for the VMF.

The officers' morale is being sapped further by personnel cuts initiated by Gorbachev. While older ships are sold for scrap, officers worry about their future.[10] The Ministry of Defense has stated it would discharge primarily those over-age and unfit for service, and help the discharged and retired officers with housing and jobs.[11] But lack of job placement and counselling services and growing unemployment, as well as an extreme shortage of housing are making the process excruciatingly painful.

Meanwhile, Navy officers have been allowed to resign their commissions (normally only poor health is grounds for doing so), and it is primarily the younger officers who are resigning in large numbers: they have less to lose in the Navy, and more to gain in the civilian economy (for instance, by joining a 'cooperative' producing consumer goods where the income can easily be five to ten times higher than that of a junior officer).

In an experimental attempt to bolster morale the Navy Command is attempting to replace the increasingly disgraced and impotent Communist Party organizations with the traditional institution of the military in Imperial Russia: the 'officer's assemblies'. This policy follows the pattern of Gorbachev's other policies, encouraging restoration of traditional Russian values and institutions in order to hold society together, something that the exhausted communist ideology can no longer do. In pre-1917 Russia officers' assemblies maintained standards of conduct and honor and fostered camaraderie among the commissioned officers of a ship. It is hoped that new officers' assemblies will do the same for the VMF, as well as provide a mechanism for settling amicably the unending squabbles which are rampant in the Soviet military in general and the Navy in particular.[12]

The Soviet and Russian military tradition, however, works against the officers' assemblies' speedy success. Their success was limited in

Imperial Russia because the bureaucratic-organizational logic turned out to be stronger than the caste spirit of the military.[13] Emergence of a true sense of professional pride among officers has been prevented by constant, petty political interference and distrust manifested in the existence of the institute of political officers. The officers' sense of camaraderie and honor has been severely undermined by the KGB's involving officers in spying on each other.

The Enlisted Men

The Soviet Navy is experiencing serious difficulties in obtaining enlisted men of adequate quality, in providing them with basic necessities and in solving ethnic problems among them.

The enlisted men are concerned not only about the hardship of naval service, but primarily about the greater length of conscription in the VMF compared with the other services (three years rather than two). At a time when the general appeal of military service has been reduced, 'the ages-old romantic appeal of naval service no longer compensates in the eyes of a multitude of young men and their parents for the "loss" of the third year'. As a result, in order to avoid service in the VMF, about 0.1 per cent of all conscripts dispatched to the Northern Fleet, feign drug and alcohol addictions (and another 0.1 per cent are real addicts).[14] The VMF Command apparently recognized some time ago the unpopularity of three-year conscription. In early 1988, Fleet Admiral Chernavin, while defending the three-year term of naval conscription as necessary because of the complexity of naval equipment, suggested offering 'real benefits to seamen' as the only solution.[15] (See below).

In the past, the VMF generally managed to feed their personnel better than the Ground Forces did.[16] As the food situation in the Soviet Union deteriorated in the 1980s, the quality of food throughout the VS declined, and the VMF has apparently lost whatever edge it used to have. Despite the fact that new improved food rations for enlisted men were announced during the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the VS,[17] little improvement has been seen. In theory, a Soviet soldier's daily ration of 4,145 calories includes .850 kg of bread, of which .400 kg is made of top grade wheat grain, .175 kg of meat, .820 kg of potatoes and unspecified vegetables, .030 kg of butter, .020 kg of vegetable oil, .070 kg of sugar, .125 kg of cereals, and .040 kg of macaroni. On holidays and Sundays a soldier is supposed to get two eggs. A seaman gets .200 kg more of meat and less cereal. The Soviets point out that their forces' theoretical caloric intake is higher than that of the US

Armed Forces (which the Soviets consider to be 4,000 calories), but note that an American serviceman's daily ration includes two and a half times more meat and meat products, twice as much fruit and vegetables, six times more eggs – and three times less bread than that of his Soviet counterpart.[18]

What makes things much worse is that official rations too often remain on paper in the VMF. The situation in the Black Sea Fleet and the even more important Northern Fleet is cited as 'especially troubling'. Commanding officers tend to overlook theft of food meant for servicemen; there is a shortage of refrigerators and other equipment; in addition, VMF ship cooks are notorious for their poor skills. As a result, sailors frequently have nothing but canned food to eat; when crews get tired of the traditional staple of the Russian military establishment – gruel – all cooking simply stops, because the cooks do not know how to prepare any other meals! Seamen from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, whose numbers are on the rise in the VMF, particularly suffer: they are not used to Russian gruel and frequently refuse to eat it at all. While, on paper, the military cooks should be offering 18 first courses for dinner, in reality not more than 2 or 3 are offered; out of 52 possible second courses, only 4 or 5 are ever prepared.[19]

In the past, the VMF succeeded in picking the better of the conscripts: mostly Slavs, politically reliable and reasonably technically proficient, with a sprinkling of lower quality conscripts from Central Asia and Transcaucasia.[20] In the 1980s, this situation has changed for the worse because of demographic factors. Today 37 per cent of all conscripts are drawn from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, a sharp increase from 28 per cent as recently as in 1980.[21] Not only are the technical skills of conscripts from these areas below the average Soviet standard (the result of a poor educational system there), but training these conscripts is significantly complicated by their poor proficiency in Russian, the official language of the armed forces. According to Minister of Defense Army General Dmitriy Yazov, in 1988 there were more than 125,000 conscripts with no Russian, 12 times more than 20 years ago; personnel in military districts comprise 90–95 ethnic groups; in divisions, 40–50; in units and ships, up to 30.[22]

The number of Kirghiz conscripts in the Baltic Fleet has increased four-fold between 1980 and 1988; whereas several years ago submarine crews in that fleet included conscripts of no more than five or six different ethnic backgrounds, today they include up to 15 ethnic groups, while soldiers of 34 ethnic groups serve in the Baltic Fleet aviation.[23] The poor Russian of the Central Asian and

Transcaucasian conscripts impedes training and the achievement of technical proficiency by ships' crews.[24] An analysis of the award list of the crew members of the Mike Class submarine (a trained eye can easily correlate last names and ethnic origins in the Soviet Union) indicates that the VMF has to keep the Central Asian and Transcaucasian conscripts from serving on their technologically more sophisticated ships: out of 67 crew members, only one had a Moslem-sounding name – and he was a Captain 1st Rank, not an enlisted man; one Captain 2nd Rank had an Armenian name, one enlisted man a Georgian name and one enlisted man a Lithuanian name; the rest all had Slavic, predominantly Russian, names.[25]

As the Navy has to rely more and more on non-Slavic conscripts, and as new ethnic conflicts break into the open, the VMF has discovered that it is unprepared to deal effectively with the nationalities' problems. The predominantly Slavic officers, including political officers, are unprepared for work with the ethnic sailor. They have no knowledge of the history and culture of non-Russians, and they have not been trained to be tactful with them. Officers have no inhibitions against humiliating seamen's ethnic pride. For many officers, the ethnic and religious traditions of non-Slavic, especially Moslem conscripts (such as the ban on eating pork, viewing cleaning jobs as unmanly) are simply to be broken forcefully. This can lead to tragedies: in one case, a Moslem conscript had refused to take off a religious charm until an officer tore it off the seaman's neck, after which the conscript committed suicide.[26]

When mass nationalist demonstrations were held in Armenia in 1988, the typical – and clumsy – reaction by Navy officers was to single out Armenian conscripts for one-on-one conversations with ships' political officers. To compound the tactlessness, sailors with distinctly Armenian-sounding surnames were summoned to the political officers via ships' loudspeakers. According to an unfortunate Armenian participant, conversations were held 'in a mysterious atmosphere of a plot'. After such conversations, the Armenian seamen 'felt curious or guarded stares behind their backs, unease of their crewmates', and began to suspect 'with horror' that they 'were guilty for everything happening [in Armenia]', and that they 'would not be trusted in certain situations'.[27]

Besides demographic factors, the health problems of young males make manning the VMF difficult. The VMF has to weigh two factors in assigning jobs to new conscripts: their technical skills and their health. It transpires that, between 1982 and 1989, while college students were called up for active duty in the armed forces, including the VMF, the VMF frequently had to disregard their technical skills

when assigning jobs, because of the shortage of healthy conscripts fit for demanding duty such as submarine service.[28]

As stated earlier, the VMF C-in-C Fleet Admiral Chernavin indicated as early as 1988 that he saw the way out of the current predicament concerning Navy conscripts as that of offering 'real benefits to seamen'. But Chernavin's statement was poorly timed; later in 1988, civilian intellectuals and middle-ranking military officers began a campaign for a volunteer armed forces. The members of the Soviet High Command, led by the Minister of Defense Army-General Dmitriy Yazov have emphatically rejected the idea as inappropriate for a socialist state, unsuitable for modern warfare, and economically ruinous. Chernavin's idea, although he did then not call for an all-volunteer Navy, came dangerously close and was probably seen by many in the High Command as only the first step down a slippery slope.

The Ministry of Defense, dominated by Ground Forces officers, chose to disregard Admiral Chernavin's warning against reducing the length of conscription for a Navy already suffering from inadequately prepared conscripts, and instead began to prepare a set of proposals for the Supreme Soviet to bring it down to two years in order to lessen public discontent about the length of naval service for conscripts.[29] For a time Admiral Chernavin stopped mentioning his idea in public. This changed in the aftermath of the disastrous fire and sinking of the Mike Class submarine, one of the Soviet Union's most advanced attack nuclear submarines, with the loss of most of her crew in international waters in April 1989. The State Commission which investigated the sinking has tentatively proposed that submarines might be manned in the future by commissioned and non-commissioned officers only, since it is too difficult for enlisted men to learn all complexities of such vessels during their term of conscription.[30] This argument counters the standard criticism of volunteer enlisted men as being too expensive – surely having ships run by officers and NCO's only would be no less expensive!

Admiral Chernavin used this finding of the Commission to launch an offensive promoting a volunteer Navy. In an interview dealing with the first Soviet aircraft carrier, *Tbilisi*, Chernavin stated categorically that if conscription were to be cut from three to two years, the Navy would not be able to operate. He revealed that he had submitted to the Minister of Defense a set of proposals for a volunteer Navy. His model, apparently, is the Royal Navy: Chernavin cited his recent visit (together with the Minister of Defense Yazov) to Great Britain, where he was allegedly told that the Royal Navy finds and retains the best men 'simply' by paying them more money than they would be

able to make anywhere else.[31] Chernavin's proposal is bound to cause substantial resistance from the other services: if implemented only in the Navy, it would give the VMF a great advantage over the other services in attracting the better conscripts, and might cut into their budgets as well. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defense has recently announced the beginning of an 'experiment': in 1991–92, the VMF is going to cut conscription to two years, while trying out a system of hiring volunteers as enlisted men for three-year contracts; later the same experiment is to be carried out in the Strategic Rocket force.[32]

Education and Training

The education of commissioned officers is one of the aspects of *perestroika* in the VMF. It was intended that the educational work carried out by VMF academies should change; subject matter was to be more closely related to the realities of the VMF operations; students were to show more independent thinking, there was to be more give-and-take between students and faculty, while modern educational technology (primarily computers) would help to usher in these changes. But the process of change has been obstructed by economic hardship and inertia. Take the example of the Grechko Naval Academy in Leningrad, where middle-ranking VMF officers are enrolled. Improved interaction between faculty and students is impossible because the classes are so large that a teacher cannot even remember the names of his students, let alone have 'individual contacts' with them. Obviously the current economic and fiscal crunch does not allow the assignment of more officers to teaching jobs; the same factor is apparently responsible for the reduction in the course of education at the Naval Academy from three to two years (in reality, down to 22 months): the students are virtually ordered to spend every night at the Academy, but the quality of education has suffered. The academy receives only one copy of exercise reports from the fleets; since there is no copier, only one student gets to read it and then share his impressions with the others.[33]

The Grechko Naval Academy is equipped with computers – but they are frequently idle because there are no floppy disks for them. Personnel at the Academy also feel that the Ministry of Defense treats their institution worse than its Ground Forces counterpart, the Frunze Academy in Moscow, in the all-important issue of housing.[34] An additional problem in officers' education is presented by an alleged lack of objectivity in the selection of candidates for the service academies: in the absence of admission tests, too great a role is played by candidates' family connections.[35] As a result, the

quality and prestige of academy education – the most important in the Soviet Navy – suffer.

Deficiencies of personnel and education are magnified by traditional shortcomings in training and exercises: lack of realism, excessive caution and resulting oversimplification, attributed by Commander of the Pacific Fleet Admiral G. Khvatov to the universal bureaucratic fear of acknowledging problems.[36] Admiral Khvatov is working to improve training in the Pacific Fleet. Commanders of groups of ships (*soyedineniye*) are to evaluate their ships' performance in training without reporting it up the chain of command; only formal tests taken under command of superior officers are to be graded; skippers are to plan their ships' training routine on their own on the basis of the real strengths and shortcomings of their crews. They will then be responsible for whether or not their ship passes or fails, without passing the buck to their superiors.

Admiral Khvatov also proposes a wholesale change in evaluating ships' readiness. Instead of using a single factor of hitting the target, a ship's performance should be evaluated on the basis of the 'realities of today's combat': timely detection, location and targeting, preemption of the enemy in the preparation and launching of a strike, and only then – the strike's accuracy, because measuring the latter without taking the others into consideration is 'senseless'. A similar approach, according to Admiral Khvatov, was used by VMF ships in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf; readiness was evaluated in the course of exercises with a tactical situation very much like combat.[37]

The psychological and organizational obstacles to such a change are considerable, as amply illustrated in *Krasnaya zvezda*, the Ministry of Defense daily, only five days after Admiral Khvatov's statement. When a submarine in Admiral Khvatov's Pacific Fleet was recently assigned a new training task, it failed the test due to the usual factors: the Pacific Fleet Directorate of Combat Training sent a host of its representatives on board, who literally took over the command of the vessel; a newly-assigned executive officer had little experience of sea duty; practically every day of the training period up to 50 per cent of the crew were involved in other activities (usually these include construction and cleaning work, repairs to buildings and grounds, etc.).[38]

Some VMF commentators also note that there is a good reason for constraining the independence of commanding officers; while technology is becoming increasingly complex, many commanding officers are young, and it is not exceptional for officers of 33 to 34 years of age to be in command of major ships.[39] This is a result of

a swing in personnel policy from one extreme to the other – from 'stagnation' to 'rejuvenation.'[40] For instance, Captain 1st Rank Ye. Vanin, the late skipper of the 'experimental' (that is, especially important and technologically complex) Mike Class submarine which sank in April 1989, was 41 years old; besides him, there were two other Captains 1st Rank on board – one of them deputy commander of the submarine squadron and 'the senior officer' on board.[41]

Economic constraints are exerting pressure upon training in the VMF. Everything – ships and equipment, fuel, electrical power, food and uniforms – is becoming more expensive, and the cost of every hour of training on VMF ships and aircraft is becoming more expensive.[42] To alleviate the problem, the Chief of VMF Combat Training, Vice-Admiral A. Kuz'min, has enthusiastically endorsed wider use of computer simulators and indicated that the VMF intends to install computer simulators on board ships right next to actual controls in order to conduct realistic training without actually using ships' mechanisms.[43] A Senior Officer of the Main Naval Staff proposes a different organization of ship training, with the emphasis on 'parallel and simultaneous' work on several training tasks by a group of several ships instead of the established practice of a single ship putting out to sea in order to work on only one training task, and the number of various training tasks also reduced.[44]

Increased emphasis on computer simulators is not viewed with equal optimism by all Navy officers. A senior officer of the VMF Main Staff, Captain 1st Rank A. Shevchenko, expressed concern that too much emphasis on simulators might result in the crews forgetting how to operate real equipment. While plans for computerized training are being made by the VMF command, officers aboard ships are suffering from computer illiteracy because of a virtual lack of personal computers. It appears that the VMF has failed to come up with procurement requirements for personal computers (which are far too expensive for individual officers to buy), and is justifying its non-procurement policy by guidelines issued 14 or even 24 years ago![45]

Many commissioned officers apparently suffer from complacency about improving their skills. A study based on the evidence from the 1960s and 1970s indicated that many Soviet officers could not operate equipment under their command.[46] There has apparently been no progress in this area in the 1980s.[47] Officers can improve their skills by advancing through several levels ('classes') of technical skills, up to 1st Class. Several factors make this process less effective than desired. First of all, moving up to the next skill level is not compulsory; without an up-or-out promotion system, the less

diligent officers have an option of not improving their technical skills. Second, the requirements for upgrading one's skill level are unrealistically grandiose: not only has an officer to learn the operation of ALL equipment and mechanisms under his command, as well as understand their theory and know about their maintenance and repair, but he also has to be fully successful in Marxist-Leninist studies, and to ensure excellent performance by his subordinates. Under such conditions, upgrading one's skill level all too frequently becomes a formality, or is avoided by officers.[48]

Quality of Technology

Whatever the problems with the quality of Navy personnel, the VMF blames the increasingly frequent ship accidents on shipbuilding R&D and industry. The naval build-up undertaken during Brezhnev's years in power might have been too rapid for the shipbuilding industry. VMF Fleet Admiral Ivan Kapitanets, First Deputy C-in-C, says that since the mid-1960s so many military and civilian R&D and shipbuilding organizations have begun to take part in naval platform construction and weapons acquisition that it has become exceedingly difficult to find any one individual responsible for technological failures, which has resulted in lax attitudes.[49] This should be of special concern to the VMF command and to the Soviet political leadership, since Gorbachev's new doctrine of quality rather than quantity presupposes that better men would have better technology at their disposal. (Some VMF experts believe that the navies of the near to mid-term future will be armed by some truly revolutionary weapons.)[50]

The VMF command must be concerned about the military R&D and industry's capability to make such future technologies reliable, since the increasingly complex weapons systems of the 1970s and 1980s have suffered from poor reliability. While new Soviet weapons and weapons systems have 'unquestionably high tactical-technical characteristics', their reliability remains a source of special concern to the Navy.[51] For instance, artillery radar on the guided missile cruiser *Vitse Admiral Drozd* has to be adjusted and serviced by the manufacturer's representatives before practically every cruise. Similar problems are encountered on much newer ships: for instance, the system for communicating with aircraft at the Kiev Class VSTOL carrier *Baku* is unusable.[52] The state commission investigating the Mike Class submarine disaster found a large number of technological problems in its design.[53] The vessel, the *Komsomolets*, was not one of the newest VMF submarines. According to Admiral Chernavin,

it was designed in the 1960s, and most of its equipment was not the latest.[54] But according to two reserve submariners, the vessel was hardly an exception; it is impossible to imagine, they say, 'an underwater cruise without a fire or a breakdown nearly every day. This is not a cruise – it is a madhouse. This is the kind of nuclear submarines they build for us . . .'[55]

In the relatively recent past, the Navy was able to acquire adequate quality hardware thanks to the VMF's ability to pressure the shipbuilding and other defense industries into fulfilling the Navy's requirements. Such pressure was exerted through the officials of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in charge of the defense industry, and through the presence of *voenpredy* – military representatives – who had the freedom to defend the interests of the monopoly customer even to the point of shutting down production lines and leaving industrial enterprises without pay if substandard products were shipped.

This system no longer works. During the Brezhnev years, when bureaucratic agencies were allowed to pursue their self-interest, with little restraint exercised by the political leadership, the main VMF contractors managed to obtain from the Council of Ministers permission to supply the VMF, 'as an exception', with hardware accepted without complete testing, as approved by the suppliers themselves. This 'exception' has turned out to be as high as thirty per cent of total production for the VMF for some suppliers.[56]

Historically, the Soviet Navy had to accept ships which had not completely passed acceptance tests: in the period immediately before the Second World War the shipbuilding industry turned out ships which the Navy refused to accept, but which, for the lack of any alternative, it had to operate while negotiating with the industry via the offices of the top political leadership on a settlement of their differences.[57] However irritating to the Navy, this was not a major defense problem given the subsequently minor role it was to play in the war. Moreover, the strong, if erratic and brutal, political leadership of Stalin frequently helped to solve the differences between the military and the defense industry through active involvement in minor details of weapons acquisition – something the Brezhnev generation of leaders was incapable of doing because of its preference for not fighting against major bureaucratic interests, and because the technological complexity of weapons had increased immensely since Stalin's days and had made political intervention more difficult.

The case of the Mike Class submarine disaster appears to confirm that the VMF has lost some of its ability to enforce quality in the

shipbuilding industry. The state commission which investigated the *Komsomolet's* sinking has concluded that the submarine's acceptance tests suffered from 'impermissible liberalism', and that in future the system of acceptance tests should be made more strict.[58] In the meantime the VMF has to pay teams of engineers and repairmen from the industry who are needed to operate and maintain ships. During a recent visit to 'one of the nuclear-powered cruisers', a reporter for the Ministry of Defense daily saw more civilians than sailors on board, and was told that the number of industry representatives on board was in the hundreds![59]

There appear to be two different approaches to improving the situation. Today the *voenpredy* monitor only the quality of the final product, which means that deficiencies are not discovered until the testing stage, when correcting them is sometimes hopelessly expensive, and the VMF finds itself in the position where it has to accept whatever is offered and hope that some of the problems will be fixed by the industry later. One possible solution is to make the *voenpredy* monitor virtually every step of the R&D and production process.[60] Such a measure, however, is impractical because (a) the immense complexity of modern weapons would require an unrealistically large number of highly trained navy officers, and (b) it would slow down the already slow process of weapons acquisition.

The second possible solution is to reduce the number of classes of ships and of ships built, and to use the released resources for improving the quality of equipment, perhaps by organizing competitions between various R&D and production facilities in order to eliminate the monopolism among VMF suppliers.[61] This approach is fully compatible with Gorbachev's doctrine of quality rather than quantity, with Soviet unilateral cuts of older ships, and with Soviet pressure for conventional naval arms control with the United States.

Conclusions

Why such a bleak picture of the Soviet Navy? Is this analysis, based on what the Soviets say about themselves today, fair? Does it reflect the reality? On the one hand, a cultural factor might be at work here: the Russians tend, just like the characters of their great nineteenth-century writer Dostoevsky, to have wild mood swings from elation to despair, from the height of imperial self-confidence that produced the 1976 decision to build 'real' aircraft carriers to today's self-dejection. After all, the Soviet Navy is continuing to operate – and therefore it must have at least a core of adequately qualified officers and men, and at least marginally reliable ships.

On the other hand, it is hardly possible that the Navy is in much better shape than Soviet society at large, which undeniably is in a crisis. The Navy ignored existing problems for years under Brezhnev, and now has to deal with them all at once. Man-made disasters in the Soviet Union (from Chernobyl to the natural gas explosion which killed nearly a thousand people in June 1989) seem to be a sign of increasing entropy, and over the last several years they have been paralleled by naval accidents. Recently it was rumored that a mutiny broke out on the *Kirov* guided missile cruiser in the North Fleet; the Soviets themselves are apparently expecting more bad things to happen, and such a mood is perhaps as important for policy as the real problems of the VMF.

The most obvious way out of the current problems involving manpower and materiel is to reduce the number of men and ships in the Soviet Navy. The cuts of older ships and some personnel confirm that the Soviets understand this. The idea that numbers of ships by themselves do not make a navy, that without adequate human and material resources no navy would be an effective 'combat system', is now popular with at least some Soviet naval officers.[62] Further cuts would allow the Soviets to improve the condition of their naval officer corps, to find either enough good conscripts for the Navy or pay volunteers to enlist, and to build, to use Lenin's old formula, 'fewer, but better' ships – provided that a certain minimum of political and economic stability is preserved in the Soviet Union in the near to mid-term future.

NOTES

Mikhail Tsypkin is Assistant Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA. The views and opinions expressed in this article are his own, and are not meant to represent the views and opinions of the Department of the Navy or any agency of the US government.

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